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THE DIONYSIAN QUALITY IN VICTORIAN POETRY

BY LOUISE COLLIER WILLCOX

IN looking over certain prominent, present-day poets, Masfield, Gibson, and Davies, one sees reaction in both form and substance; in form toward greater simplicity and austerity; in substance toward a deeper concern for the immediate. Turn over a volume of Gibson and Masfield, for example, and the very words used are those of common conversation. One opens haphazard at such perfectly simple, straightforward utterances as:

I think of the friends who are dead, who were dear long ago in the past.

Her heart is always doing lovely things
Filling my wintry mind with simple flowers.

He swabbed the decks with clouts till it was dry.

These bespeak a democratic sympathy with common life that refuses to be above the general understanding even in diction.

The Victorian, however, looked at poetry not only as a high tradition, but as a legitimate profession. This is not by any manner of means asserting that poetry, so seriously envisaged, is necessarily a higher art. Few German poets rank with Heine, who may be said to have treated poetry much as the modern English poets are doing. First he discarded literary conventions and strove definitely to reproduce in his verse the spontaneity and naturalness of daily speech. Moreover, he appealed to very generally dispersed emotions and thoughts.

Returning to the Victorians, we find metaphysics liberally sprinkled over the work of Tennyson, Browning, Swinburne, Shelley, Wordsworth, and here and there an effort at it in that most concrete of workers, Keats. The quality we miss

in the Georgian poets of to-day and find in the greater Victorians may be called Dionysian after Nietzsche.

Nietzsche writes in a most explanatory passage:

"Dionysian art seeks to convince us of the eternal joy of existence; only we are to seek this joy not in phenomena, but behind phenomena. We are to perceive how all that comes into being must be ready for a sorrowful end; we are compelled to look into the terrors of individual existence, yet we are not to become torpid; a metaphysical comfort tears us momentarily from the bustle of transforming figures. We are really for brief moments primordial being itself and feel its indomitable desire for being and joy; the struggle, the pain, the destruction of phenomena now appear to us as something necessary, considering the surplus of innumerable forms of existence which throng and push one another into life, considering the exuberant fertility of the universal will. We are pierced by the maddening sting of those pains at the very moment when we have become, as it were, one with the immeasurable, primordial joy in existence, and when we anticipate in Dionysian ecstasy the indestructibility and eternity of this joy. In spite of fear and pity we are the happy living beings, not as individuals, but as the one living being with whose procreative joy we are blended."

This passage, when it touches upon the necessity of the destruction of phenomena to make room for the innumerable forms of existence thronging and pushing into life, comes close to the Bergsonian philosophy of change. If one were striving carefully to distinguish between the Georgian, or present, and the Victorian method of the poets to realize the whole of life, one would say that the Georgian method is one of inclusion; the pointing out of phenomena heretofore looked upon as negligible; while the effort of the Victorians was a schooling in identification. In innumerable ways they repeated, there is a bond of union; all things are interconnected, interpenetrated, interpermeable, and are, therefore, largely considered one and whole. It is the difference between analysis and synthesis. This synthetic effort of the mind dictated entirely Swinburne's poem "Hertha." Of this poem there is an amusing and well-authenticated anecdote. Swinburne had read Emerson's "Oversoul" with no little irritation. Fancy the feeling of Swinburne, Apollonian by nature, French and Greek by culture, coming upon the passage: "We live in succession, in parts, in particles.

Meantime within man is the soul of the whole; the wise silence; the universal beauty to which every part and parcel is equally related; the eternal one." In despite of irritation the immediate result of Swinburne's reading was the greatest philosophic poem he ever wrote:

I am that which began;
 Out of me the years roll;
 Out of me God and man;
 I am equal and whole.
 God changes and man and the form of them bodily; I am the soul.

I the mark that is missed
 And the arrows that miss,
 I the mouth that is kissed,
 And the breath in the kiss,
 The search, and the sought and the seeker, the soul and the body that is.

It is not known whether Swinburne ever knew Emerson's poem in the same vein:

Let the red slayer think he slays,
 Or if the slain think he is slain,
 They know not well the subtle ways
 I keep and pass and turn again.

 They reckon ill who leave me out,
 When me they fly I am the wings;
 I am the doubter and the doubt,
 And I the hymn the Brahmin sings.

It has been the function of Apollo to distinguish between the beautiful and ugly; to exclude the undesirable and exalt the chosen; therefore to draw lines and fair ones in the world; to define, to limit, to make a harmonious and lovely representation of life. It was the function of Dionysius to escape, whether by religious ecstasy or by the intoxication of the vine, or by the wayward loosening of the shackles of the individual, to escape limitation; to destroy whatever pretended to completion; to break down barriers; to identify the self with the whole of life and nature; and to exalt that chaos which preceded the division of life into light and darkness.

To return to Nietzsche, who first pointed out clearly these distinctive impulses of thought and art: "Apollo vanquishes the suffering of the individual by the radiant glorification of the eternity of phenomena; here beauty

triumphs over the suffering inherent in life. . . . In Dionysian art and its tragic symbolism the same nature speaks to us with its true, undissembled voice. 'Be as I am!' amidst the ceaseless change of phenomena the eternally creative primordial mother, eternally impelling existence, self-satisfying eternally with this change of phenomena."

The immediate answer of any artist of Apollonian training to a mystical Dionysian tendency is: This is inartistic; just as it is the present-day reply to the futurist painters and sculptors. Art, would the traditionalists say, is the careful barring out of the ugly and the inspired choice of the beautiful, or at any rate of the clearly interesting? Not at all, is the answer of the futurist and the cubist and the synchronist; art is any possible creation that is a part of life and nature.

The Dionysian element in life, then, is that striving which makes for realms beyond the bounds of logically defined reason; a realm highly reprobated by such writers as Mr. Santayana and Vernon Lee, to whom the long tradition of human logic fulfils the whole gospel of life.

"Undoubtedly," writes the former, "actual spirit is simple and does not know how it builds; but for that reason actual spirit does not really create or build anything, but merely watches, now with sympathetic, now with shocked attention, what is being created and built for it."

Keats, of all the Victorians, was the most perfect example of an Apollonian poet. When he wrote the "Ode to a Grecian Urn" he was entirely Apollonian, but when in the "Ode to a Nightingale" he remembered how often he had been "half in love with easeful death" and yearned again "to cease upon the midnight with no pain," he was verging upon the Dionysian mode of consciousness, as he was more especially in "Endymion" when he answers the question, "Wherein lies happiness?" with,

In that which becks
Our ready minds to fellowship divine,
A fellowship with essence; till we shine
Full alchemized and free of space.

This same "fellowship with essence" was a most constant presence with Wordsworth, who aimed at Dionysian results, not only after the Georgian method, the discarding of chosen material and lifting up of the commoner and

more general aspects of life, but by the real Dionysian *Berausung*.

There I beheld the emblem of a mind
That feeds upon infinity, that broods
Over the dark abyss, intent to hear
Its voices issuing forth to silent light
In one continuous stream; a mind sustained
By recognitions of transcendent power,
In sense conducting to ideal form;
In soul more than a mortal privilege.

Further on in the same passage he speaks of this power to feed upon infinity as being the power by which all higher minds deal with the whole compass of the Universe. He extols common life and the childlike mind and the connection of one sense by another because all these lead to a sense of the community and interrelation of life. Our childhood, he assures us

Sits upon a throne
That hath more power than all the elements.
I guess not what this tells of Being past
Nor what it augurs of the life to come;
But so it is.

Again we strike the Dionysian note in the joy

Of elevated thoughts; a sense sublime
Of something far more deeply interfused
Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns,
And the round ocean and the living air,
And the blue sky and in the mind of man;
A motion and a spirit that impels
All thinking things, all objects of all thought
And rolls through all things.

He is quite sure that our birth is but a sleep and a forgetting and the soul that cometh from afar has not altogether lost its relation with the totality of life,

But trailing clouds of glory do we come.

It is by this dim sense, he feels, that listening to the notes that are the ghostly language of the ancient earth, man drinks in visionary power. The soul remembering *how* she felt, but not *what* she felt,

Retains an obscure sense
Of possible sublimity whereto
With growing faculties she doth aspire.

In such moments of the submergence of self,

A holy calm
Would overspread my soul, that bodily eyes
Were utterly forgotten, and what I saw
Appeared like something in myself, a dream,
A prospect of the mind.

He cannot away with the thought that dust as we seem to be, there is a dark, inscrutable workmanship reconciling discordant elements in life, making them cling together in one society, like harmony in music; he is sure when we will,

Our souls have sight of that immortal sea
Which brought us hither.

There is then no break that counts between the single soul and the great creative force which is the whole, for Wordsworth.

The Dionysian quality is shown in many forms in Shelley: in his reiterated desire to find unconsciousness in swooning or in ecstasy; in his sense of the continuity of life, before and after death; in his sense of all being in One. And again in his choice of terrible themes.

I pant, I sink, I tremble, I expire,

was a repeated state with Shelley. He was known to swoon at the sweetness of daffodils, and in the "West Wind" Ode he speaks of sense fainting at the sweetness of flowers. In "Episychidion" he speaks of jonquils that dart their arrowy odour through the brain,

Till you might faint with that delicious pain.

And of murmurs as from a hyacinth full of honey dew that kills "the sense with passion," and again a wild odour felt "beyond the sense."

Love and beauty come to him always "like echoes from an ante-natal dream." Death is merely being "made one with Nature" and in one case "a portion of the loveliness." "The One remains, the many change and pass."

That light whose smile kindles the universe,
That beauty in which all things work and move,
That benediction which the eclipsing curse
Of birth can quench not, that sustaining love
Which through the web of being blindly wove

By man and beast and earth and air and sea
 Burns bright or dim, as each are mirrors of
 The fire for which all thirst, now beams on me,
 Consuming the last clouds of cold mortality.

Sleep has sights as clear and true
 As any waking eyes can view,

is an assertion of his belief in subconscious experience. The "world's shadowy walls" were constantly disappearing, leaving his soul to sublime experiences.

Wild Spirit which art moving everywhere;
 Destroyer and Preserver,

whom he hails in the "Ode to the West Wind," is the very name of Dionysius also.

I die, I faint, I fail,

in the "Indian Serenade" is again a Dionysian ecstasy as is his power to throw himself into the sensations of a cloud or wind. He loved all waste and solitary places because there we taste

The pleasure of believing what we see
 Is boundless as we wish our souls to be,

And he loves as well all points where earth and ocean meet,

And all things seem only one
 In the universal sun.

Like Wordsworth, he felt,

A spirit interfused around,
 A thrilling silent life.

He knew how joy denies itself because it, too intense, is turned to pain. They are chiefly happy whose pleasure sought

Extinguishes all sense and thought.

It was "memories of an ante-natal life" that made this world seem less like a "penal hell."

But it is in his choice of terrible themes for his tragedies, above all, that Shelley shows himself a thorough Dionysian. For, unlike Apollo, Dionysius never avoids the terrible. It is Dionysius who realizes in the cosmic will the insistent demand for the destruction of the individual. In so far as life is a striving for personal satisfaction, in so far as

it necessarily miserable and futile. The Dionysian welcomes the call of unknown and vaster forces regardless of their powers of destruction. Tragedy is, of course, founded upon destruction; it deals with the forces that are destructive of life, ties, bonds, of all static and peaceful conditions. It elevates, as Schopenhauer has pointed out, because it awakens the knowledge that mortal life is unworthy of profound attention. The Dionysian spirit invites the undaunted vision into eternity, and is undismayed by death and destruction because its thought is identified with the idea of eternal becoming. It attacks the traditional in the full conviction that creation itself is imperishable and will go on forever. It is ruthless with the temporal, aiming ever at the larger, the more unbounded creation. There are terrors, indeed, to the frail in the Dionysian vision. Who can face unflinchingly the thought of the vast emptiness of the interstellar coal-sacks of space? Who can look peacefully at the eternal unfolding of time, space, and causality? Not until the instinctive care for the survival of the individual is gone can the Dionysian spirit truly awaken and look out with impunity. This spirit admits the eternal contradiction; man's desire for rest, the static, the permanent, but realizes his growth consists in breaking the moulds in which these may be found, and making forward into vaster spaces.

Nietzsche makes a distinction between the Apollonian who triumphs in forms and consoles by their means, and the Dionysian whose outlook is in ecstasies. For only in veritable ecstasy can a human being still rejoice in the titanic and barbarous forces of destruction. Only in intoxication can a mother tear her son limb from limb as in *The Bacchæ*. Yet the Apollonian endures only through such outbreaks. Art—all art tends to become trite, formal, uninspiring and conventional by repetition, and the chaotic is its refuge and safety. Even the Venus of Milo and the Samothracian Niké, though they retain their historic grandeur, cannot be permanent exponents of consciousness. The moulds must be broken for newer and vaster ideas to enter.

With Whitman and Edward Carpenter, the Dionysian sense of the oneness of existence is perpetually present. Whitman cannot away with cataloguing various things in order to persuade that they are, after all, one thing. Carpenter, too, feels insistently how

All things melt and run—if you only watch them long enough!
 And you cannot imprison anything into one shape—it will surely give
 you the slip.
 Nothing in essence dies, and nothing in mortal form remains.

Both these poets seem to turn from the tragic aspects of Dionysius and attempt to make the visage of eternity amiable and familiar. They forget the suffering Dionysius who himself underwent the agonies of dismemberment and exemplified all the sorrow of knowing two worlds at once, the limited and the limitless. Dionysius, according to the Greek conception, at least, even in the most wanton ecstasy, never lost the elements of majesty and terror. He aims, indeed, ever at the emotions and conceptions that are untrammelled and unbounded; knowledge and suffering are faced unflinchingly, and solace is offered only in the voluntary abdication of the ego and the sense of being one with the whole. Even Tennyson notes this sense in such poems as "The Higher Pantheism," "De Profundis," and "Flower in the Crannied Wall," as well as in such prose descriptions of trance as:

All at once, as it were, out of consciousness of individuality, individuality itself seemed to dissolve and fade away into boundless being, and this not in a confused state, but the clearest of the clear, the surest of the sure, the weirdest of the weird, utterly beyond words—when death seemed impossible—the loss of personality seemed no extinction, but the only true life.

The tradition reaches down even to William Watson, who writes of those moods when life stands

With hands
 Stretched toward visionary lands,
 Where vapors lift
 A moment, and ærial strands
 Gleam through the rift.

The Dionysian quality is noticeably absent from the work of the young Georgian poets of promise. We have not yet found an English poet of this generation who can give us a concentrated picture of the world, using the Apollonian means to a Dionysian end. But should the modern tendency to prefer the commonplace and trite image and symbol continue, much that is beautiful and vital in poetry will go lost. For great poetry must strive after great associations. It will also prefer forms of distinction and elevation, and a diction definitely adapted, by tradition and convention, to the uses of poetry.

LOUISE COLLIER WILLCOX.